

The Stetson University 21 Meal Plan Requirement

PROBLEM

As a result of the meal plan policy at Stetson University, which requires that all first-year students be enrolled in the 21-meal plan, many students are left upset by the requirement and also faced with an additional financial burden in addition to the already-high costs of tuition, room and board, and textbooks. Unless they eat every meal in a given week on campus and dine the full three times per day every single day - both of which are highly unlikely - students are regrettably wasting meals that they were forced to pay for.

Momentarily ignoring the traditional eating habit of having three full meals per day, the majority of United States citizens do not eat 21 full meals in a given week; this especially applies to college students. When the extreme sleeping habits of many college students are combined with a busy class schedule, it becomes a given that there will be many days when an individual will struggle trying to find time to eat two meals, especially under campus dining hours. For example, when a student wakes up at noon on a Saturday morning and goes to bed after midnight, they will only be able to eat a maximum of two meals on campus, with any late-night meal or snacks having to come from off campus, and those unused meals going to waste.

Additionally, even when campus dining is open. Stetson students can not be expected to eat every meal in either the Commons or the Hat Rack. Whether it is from a weekend off campus, a day trip to Tampa, or any other off-campus activity, there are countless occasions

when students will eat off campus. While the penalization is indirect, students are still paying twice for those meals which they eat off campus: the meal was prepaid for as part of the meal plan, and then by eating elsewhere, the student is paying a second time for that given meal.

If a student were to miss an average of six meals per week, their waste would make up the difference between the 21 and 15-meal plans, which are priced at \$1550 and \$1175 per semester, respectively. Over the course of a full year, that is a \$750 difference - \$750 that could be used on off-campus food, textbooks, or any other productive way in which the student could utilize this money had they not been forced to ultimately throw it away. Yes, for some students, this may not be a significant amount of money. But for others, saving \$750 may be the difference for them between marginal financial flexibility and having none whatsoever.

When students do manage to use all 21 meals in a week, many of them are often used on the final day of the week to at least get something out of them, such as someone using five last meals on a Saturday night for five cookies in the Hat Rack. Many, however, simply give in and allow a large portion of their meals to go to waste every week. This unfortunate burden is unfairly placed upon the new students, and it is only fair to review this policy and decide how Stetson University truly wants to welcome its incoming freshmen class each year.

PROPOSAL

I propose that this requirement be lifted or at least modified so that freshmen are only required to enroll in the 15-meal plan. An additional option would be to expand the dining options in one of the following forms: extended hours in the Hat Rack, Commons, or both; the creation of an additional on-campus dining locale; or the implementation of a system that would allow meals to be used at the Kiosk or on pizza deliveries.

While there is room for discussion on any specifics of the policy alteration or potential other solutions, my ultimate proposal remains based upon the sole idea of removing the 21-meal plan requirement for freshman. Even though there would be a minor income loss stemming from the students who chose to enroll in the 15-meal plan rather than the 21-meal plan, there are plenty of ways that this lessened income from the freshman class could be offset.

JUSTIFICATION

First and foremost, unlike some aspects of Stetson University that may be based upon tradition and not have changed for a long period of time, the meal plan policy is a very debatable issue that was reviewed and modified just two years ago. Formerly offering plans with varying meal and point quantities but the same total cost. the changes two years ago were made in effort to provide Stetson students with more flexibility regarding their meal plans. This goal was accomplished, but the current 21-meal requirement contradicts the theory of flexibility, and therefore is an issue that should be considered when the meal plan is reviewed in the summer of 2005 (Cox).

Stetson'University General Manager of Dining Services Helen Cox identified the school's reasoning behind this requirement as the following: Stetson is obligated to offer meals to its students when they want them by providing them with enough weekly meals, it serves as a guaranteed income, and parents of freshmen want to be sure that their students will eat. Even though these are all perfectly valid reasons, the increasing student dissatisfaction is something that must be taken into account in order for the university to best make use of its meal plan program.

Providing student flexibility, and potentially taking a minor financial hit to do so, is actually becoming very common across the country, as more and more colleges and universities

are slowly moving away from their policies that force unfair meal plans upon their students. In research that examined the dining services at Iowa State University, a marketing firm found through a series of surveys, focus groups, and interviews that the biggest complaint among consumers is the lack of flexibility in their meal plans. One of their final determinations acknowledged the financial commitment needed from universities in a statement that touched on the status of meal plans becoming more student-friendly: "The concept of increased flexibility is a very scary economic proposition, but a looming service reality in today's market... We cannot recall conducting a focus group with meal plan subscribers in the last several years where flexibility was not a core driver related to satisfaction" ("At Iowa" 14). In order for Stetson University to follow in the footsteps of these universities across the country with successful meal plans, an alteration to the 21-meal plan requirement for freshman is essential as it would greatly increase student satisfaction.

An additional study was conducted by H. David Porter, who examined the college meal plan as a whole before discussing ten important aspects about their respective meal plan that all schools must consider. While he did acknowledge the significance of maintaining flexibility and being receptive to consumer input. Porter took an interesting route that also offered various ways in which extreme meal plans can be justified and improved upon. These elements were highlighted by three key ideas: maintaining hours of operations that better fit the college lifestyle, offering meal plan incentives, and providing as much variety in foods as possible. One path that Stetson University could take would be to maintain the current requirement while working to increase the students' ability to make use of their meal plans in one or more of these forms. Given the high costs to run the Hat Rack or Commons for extended hours, however, it

would financially be more of a viable option to simply lift the 21-meal requirement and allow freshmen the option to choose a meal plan at their own discretion (26).

While this proposal is not intended to come across in a way in which it attacks the current policy and demands a change, many students have been driven to this type of an opinion that can carry over from simply being negative feelings about a school's meal plan to negative feelings about the college or university as a whole, in a very emotionally-charged article, the author goes as far as calling the meal plans of Ivy League schools "a hideous waste of food and money" in her title before ranting on the topic of college meal plans, specifically providing examples of those schools in Ivy League (Wilson 40). In addition to providing various examples, the author also proceeds to hint at generally negative feelings toward the already-expensive private universities that overcharge and "over-require" when it comes to their meal plans. If first-year students continue to be denied a choice of meal plans - even the option of moving down to just the 15-meal plan - then it is possible that similar feelings will develop among members of the Stetson community and ultimately have negative effects on the image of Stetson University itself.

Considering the main idea of simply lessening the 21-meal plan requirement to the 15-meal plan, the university could offset the loss of revenue by also modifying the requirement for juniors. Rather than allowing juniors to choose any plan at their own discretion, they could be required to purchase at least the 7-meal plan, which would result in a guaranteed \$440 additional income per year for every junior student. This additional modification would make up for most of the losses that come with giving freshmen a choice between the 21 and 15-meal plans - any small losses would have to be taken in by Stetson University under the acknowledgement that it is in order to better serve the students. Further, this change would not upset junior students, as

requiring them to purchase a 7-meal plan is far from an unfair policy, making it a win-win situation for all parties involved.

If the requirement was to remain as it is currently written, it could be further justified by a variety of methods. Following the recent successful renovation of the Hat Rack, it would be very beneficial to both the school and the students if the Commons dining area was renovated as well. Some examples of schools that have had positive results after significant remodeling include Cornell University, Georgetown University, and Wilkes University, all of which made changes to both their facility and menu and in turn received much more meal plan participation and satisfaction from their students.

At Cornell, the school turned their dining facility into a very inviting location with a slightly larger capacity and reviewed and altered the menu, boasting popular display-cooking and self-serve stations. The result: a 50 increase in traffic ("With" 1). Georgetown recently completed a lengthy six-year remodeling of the school's dining facilities. While the much larger school made alterations that Stetson University would be financially unable to do, the changes made at Georgetown also reflect these key ideas of maintaining a variety of food that is prepared in front of the consumers as well as keeping the dining facilities in the best condition possible ("Georgetown" 16). Finally, at Wilkes University, the simple modification of the dining stations to include a now-popular Asian cuisine station resulted in a 40 increase in traffic and satisfaction ("For" 1). While there are many possible solutions and ways to improve the school's dining offerings, any of these trend-setting changes at other universities would be viable options at Stetson as well.

Finally, one last method of justifying the meal plan requirement would come in the form of adding an additional dining establishment somewhere on campus. Though there is high

demand for another dining option and plenty of welcomed restaurants, it would not be a strong financial investment by Stetson to add an entirely new location, which brings us back around to the basic idea of simply lifting the requirement. With perfect student satisfaction impossible to achieve and the university making progress towards improving the meal plan program, the removal of the 21-meal plan requirement for freshman would be the most feasible option, as it is financially adequate and benefits the students.

CONCLUSION

The meal plan policy at Stetson University can be changed in a wide variety of ways, many of which will improve the undergraduate experience without hindering the dining services' finances. Because of this fact, the possibility for changes is an issue that should at least be discussed in great detail, and any of the aforementioned changes would, in all likelihood, greatly reward the University for the time and effort put into best using the meal plan requirement to keep the students happy while also securing the income necessary to operate.

Works Cited

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